The Progressive Review

Nbr 344
Summer 1996

Washington's most unofficial source

How the trouble began

The trouble really began at the wedding. I didn't know it, however, until a few months later when I received a letter from an MIT student thanking me for the summer job offer.

I didn't actually remember offering him a job. In fact, only two things about the wedding remained clear. One was coming across my younger sister -- who leveled any playing field she happened to cross -- introducing me to her "good friend Billy." I blinked and realized that my sister's new-found friend Billy was in fact William McChesney Martin, Chairman of the Federal Reserve. He had the happy look of someone remembering what it was like to be called Billy again.

The other thing I recalled was purchasing a wedding present for Charlie and his new wife Cornelia. The present was a bull calf bought during libational negotiations with Charlie's farmer neighbor. It seemed a suitable present for about your oldest friend and Charlie and Cornelia apparently thought so, too. They named the calf Sam, albeit eventually converting it into a steer and eating it.

thirty years behind the masthead

30 years ago this summer, your editor started *The Capitol East Gazette*, a community monthly that in 1969 became the city-wide alternative paper, *The DC Gazette*, and then, in 1985, *The Progressive Review*. In this article he presents some of the mitigating circumstances for these developments and, for the first time, gives his side of the story.

I did not, however, recall hiring an MIT student for the summer. Still, I could hardly -- according to the not unreasonable code of the day -- wriggle out of an obligation simply because of consumption-induced impairment.

Which is how Jim Smith came to work for me, how that summer thirty years ago I started *The Capitol East Gazette*, and how I ended up where, however shakily, I find myself today. How, in brief, the trouble began.

Jim Smith -- no relative but our families were friends -- had started his own publication at MIT and already possessed the energy, enthusiasm and chutzpah that would eventually lead to his publishing a short-lived daily newspaper in Brooklyn, running as an independent for mayor of New York City and virtually inventing the modern trade of broadcast transcripts. The latter enterprise began one night when Jim sat down with a videotape of a national TV news show, typed out a transcript and delivered it to the show's headquarters the next day as a sample of what he could do. From this grew Journal Transcripts, a name that would become common to the closing credits of years of TV talk shows.

At the time, of course, Jim had no more idea of where it all might lead than I did. I was a 28-year-old ex-radio newsman recently out of the Coast Guard and was publishing a small magazine called *The Idler*. I lived in the Capitol Hill section of Washington, a neighborhood that was racially mixed but becoming less so with the growing success of a restoration movement led by a vigorous herd of real estate dealers. The community's black residents were not happy with what was going on, but neither were many white residents, more than a few of whom had moved there to live in an integrated neighborhood.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Progressive Review
Not affiliated with any major corporation

The Progressive Review is published 10 times a year. Formerly the DC Gazette. One year subscription: $18. Two year subscription: $32. Single copies: $2.00..

Editor: Sam Smith
The Progressive Review
1739 Connecticut Ave NW
Washington DC 20009
202-232-5544
Fax Nbr: 202-234-6222

Internet: ssmith @ igc. org
CompuServe: 72067,1525
Prodigy: SFGW68A
ISSN 0889-2202

Hotline: If you are a subscriber we will add you to our on-line hotline. Send your e-mail address to any of the addresses above.

Become a supporting subscriber: Many small circulation publications keep going with the help of supporting subscribers who contribute a sum in addition to their regular subscription to aid the publication in its work. We will be grateful if you indicate your support of our efforts by subscribing or renewing with a contribution above the normal fee or by sending us a contribution today. Mail to the Progressive Review, 1739 Connecticut Ave NW, Washington DC 20009

Help spread the word: To introduce the Review to friends through a free trial subscription, just write their names and addresses on a postcard and send it to the Review.

Home page: The Review's Web site is located at
http://emporium.turnpike.net/P/ProRev/

Copyright 1996, The Progressive Review.

Articles not otherwise copyrighted may be reprinted by other periodicals provided they give proper credit and pay their normal reprint fees, if any.

I had originally come to Capitol Hill in order to room with Larry Smith -- no relative but a college buddy. Returning there after the Coast Guard, however, I found it hard to ignore both the simmering tension and the hope of something better. Besides, I soon met Bob Smith -- no relative but a Presbyterian minister -- an Alinsky-trained organizer who was methodically laying the foundation for future community action.[1] Bob and I had some long talks into which I would occasionally slip my dream of starting a neighborhood newspaper to compete with one deeply in the service of the restoration movement. Since I barely had time for putting out *The Idler,* however, these talks were mostly that.

Until, that is, I got the letter from Jim Smith. Why not, I thought, start a neighborhood newspaper over the summer with the extra help? If it worked out, fine; if not, at least I could stop imagining it. Bob Smith gave his blessing and his support, but urged me strongly not to use the term "Capitol Hill." "The Hill" consisted of the blocks closest to the Capitol, which were rapidly turning white. Bob proposed that I use "Capitol East," a phrase then only found on the maps and in the reports of city planners. It included an area deep into black Washington, with only about a quarter of its residents white.

Which is how I came not only to start *The Capitol East Gazette* but would try to rename the neighborhood at the same time.

🕮

A year earlier, I had traveled to Jackson, Mississippi, to cover the hearings of the US Commission on Civil Rights. The hearings were not just about civil rights abuses in Mississippi but an investigation into the bleakest corners of the American soul. No story I ever covered would affect me more. My skepticism concerning the American system, learned as a Washington radio reporter, was quickly turning into something far less passive and patient.

A few months later, I had driven to DC's Benning Road to pick up riders participating in a one day bus boycott against higher fares. All over town, people like me were substituting for the buses as some 100,000 citizens stayed off mass transit. I wrote an article about my experiences and not long afterwards got a call from the protest organizer, who was looking for help dealing with the media.

Which is how I ended up working with a man sometimes described in the press then as "dashiki-clad Negro militant Marion Barry."

---

[1] The confluence of Smiths here is not at all unusual to those of us of the ancient ilk. Once, in the Coast Guard, I was on a bowling team consisting entirely of five left-handed Smiths.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Barry, the local director of SNCC, was starting a major campaign -- the Free DC Movement -- to end the colonial status of the city's 800,000 mostly black citizens. DC was still very much a southern town and years later Marion would introduce me as "one of the first whites who'd have anything to do with me." In fact, there were others, most notably L.D. Pratt, a fedora-sporting, self-taught prairie populist given to phrases like, "Look, man, we've got to implode the power base." When he wasn't planning strategy, he was holed up in the Library of Congress digging into ideas and history and discovering words like "implode."

Marion was different then -- earnest, effective and without the omnipresent odor of scandal he would come to carry like an alcoholic's l'eau de Old Granddad. To be sure, Marion hit upon any woman passing through his penumbra, but he also worked day and night, took risks that other wouldn't, went to jail, inspired, created, organized, led, pled and soon came to be regarded as one of the most important black leaders in town.

Our different ethnicities were never a point of conflict, and I early saw him not only as someone who could lead the city towards the self-government we hadn't had in nearly a century, but who could run the place when we reached that goal. I was right. For awhile.

When people wrote about Marion years later, they wouldn't mention all that because they had never seen it. All they saw was the cynical, corroded shell of a man they hadn't known and thought it had been that way all along.

Marion was leading a movement, but it had some of the intensity, closeness and spirit of a rebellion. Barry enlisted into the cause anyone he could find. You would be talking on the phone and a special operator would break in with an "emergency call" and it would be Barry or Pratt or someone else with the latest crisis or plan. There were black cops who had been spiritually seconded to the movement and ministers who served as a link between the radical Barry and the more moderate civil rights movement and friendly reporters who still followed there was an objective difference between justice and injustice. And through it all was excitement, excitement and hope, not even dampened by the thirtieth chorus of "We Shall Overcome" sung in a church hall while waiting for Marion finally to show up.

The first goal of SNCC's Washington project, the Free DC Movement, was home rule for the city. But as the movement grew, it expanded its scope quickly -- at one point including a massive attempt to identify the true holdings of every slumlord in DC in order that effective action could be taken against them. In pre-computer days, it was a project doomed to failure but it suggests both the energy and the diligence of the times.

As Barry moved into politics, first on the school board, then the city council, then the mayor's office I moved

The Capitol East

GAZETTE

Serving Near Northeast & Near Southeast Washington

VOL. I — JULY 1966 — Nr 1

East of the Dome

The children who live on Lexington Place NE recently started a drive to keep their street and adjoining alleys clean.

We have it on good advice (a trash man told us) that people should not put cat and dog dirt in their trash cans. "How would you like to stand up in that trash in that stuff all day?" he queried. His suggested disposal method: put it in the garbage can. We haven't checked yet with the garbage men to find out what he thinks about that.

A quick tour of 20 area elementary schools revealed the following: half had no trash receptacles outside the buildings or in the playgrounds. Forty per cent had virtually no playground equipment other than a set of swinging bars. More than half had numerous broken windows and only about a third presented an appearance of sound structure and maintenance. The schools in greatest disrepair were predominantly in the Northeast.

Camp Friendship is filled to capacity this summer. About 160-170 children will be accomodated in groups of 35 to 40 during sessions that run through August 31.

We have received reports that some local stores are refusing to accept empty bottles from children, saying them less than the deposit, or else are requiring that purchases be made when the bottles are returned. This is unfortunate since the children, finding no financial benefit from the bottles, often succumb to the temptation of rendering them sightly against the nearest lamp-post. This practice is good for the tire dealers but no one else.

We are convinced that no official from the District Highway Department has ever tried to walk across Pennsylvania Ave at 3rd St. SE. Even with a dry track and cleats it is impossible to traverse the intersection legally in less than two cycles of the lights.

Right to Vote Drive Grows

Moves on in Congress

LOCAL GROUPS ACTIVE

The drive to bring Washington self-government is gaining momentum. Recognizing that the next session of Congress will probably be more conservative than the present one, local right-to-vote groups are increasing their efforts to bring their cause to the attention of legislators and the nation.

In Congress, several developments have made it apparent that Free D.C. supporters there do not intend to let the issue die. There are indications that the issue will come forcefully before the legislators before they go home this fall.

One possibility is that the Senate will attach a home rule order to education legislation sent that body by the House. It would then be dispatched to conference, where the House conferees would be under the aegis of the House Education and Labor Committee which, unlike the House District Committee, is favorably disposed towards local self-government.

In a separate move, a House Education and Labor subcommittee has already amended a piece of District education legislation before it to include provisions for an elected school board here.

The Free D.C. Movement is currently planning a series of action projects that will raise the right to vote issue before the nation and Congress.

A coalition of youth organizations, including Young Democrats and Young Republicans, plan a major rally later this month for self-government.

The right-to-vote cause received a boost early in June when the White House Conference to Fulfill These Rights went overwhelmingly on record in favor of self-government. Local leaders cite this as a good indication of the national support that can be gained for their cause once the issue receives adequate publicity.

The first issue of The Capitol East Gazette

my support and enthusiasm with him, and without apologies. Once in the city job, however, his weaknesses quickly lost their countenance and whatever greatness Marion possessed started to disintegrate. A fascinating disintegration to watch actually there was nothing except the passing reference to times of which I suspect both of us were proud.

Later I would sometimes sneak into where we met.

"What's happenin', Sam?"

"Not much, Marion. Just staying home with the wife and kids. How about you?"

One February of an election year, he told me at a party, "We've got to have lunch, Sam." I replied, "Marion, we don't have to have lunch until at least July."

But it wasn't really funny and I knew it and I think he did too and when he went to jail, I wrote an article in which I quoted Jack Burden, the journalist in *All the King's Men* who turned into Willie Stark's henchman:

What happened to his greatness is not the question. Perhaps he spilled it on the ground the way you spill a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

liquid when the bottle breaks. Perhaps he piled up his greatness and burnt it in one great blaze in the dark like a bonfire and then there wasn't anything but dark and the embers winking. Perhaps he could not tell his greatness from ungreatness and so mixed them together that what was adulterated was lost. But he had it. I must believe that.

I was already 30 by the end of 1967, too old to be trusted anymore, they said. In fact, there were a lot of older people around who, to a degree not widely recognized, held things together in the sixties, especially old leftists who actually knew how to organize marches and rallies and fight in court and keep offices going even when overfilled with people who were just passing through or trying out a new direction for a little while or using the moment in history as a crash pad for their souls.

There would come to be the notion that the sixties were an act of immaculate conception. In fact, they were more an act of conversion, conversion of the isolated, unfocussed, dispersed and inarticulate alienation of the 1950s into a mass movement with direction, common language and rules. One of those rules was that nothing good and pure had ever happened before.

So if you had come of age in the fifties you were something of an anomaly, especially if you were a big guy and white and easily mistaken for a cop. Under a tree by the Lincoln Memorial's reflecting pool during a big peace march in 1967, the tie-died, pony-tailed protester next to me was quiet for a long time. Then he turned and asked softly, "CIA?"

I puffed on my pipe. "Nope"

"FBI?"

"Nope."

"Smoke?"

I took the pipe out of my mouth. "Half and Half, all day long."

"Cool," he said and gave me his love beads.

John Wiebenson created for the Gazette the first urban planning comic strip in America. The Gazette also ran the first regular column by a prison inmate

I did not get off as easily at later demonstrations. At an early environmental protest, an alternative video squad from upstate New York found me in a dark blue T-shirt and baseball hat taking notes. With camera rolling, they quizzed me at length as to my law enforcement affiliation, finding my answers profoundly unconvincing. Later, I sent them some copies of the *Gazette* along with a note saying that even 220-pound iron pumpers might want to save the environment. I never heard from them.

Once, a demonstration against a proposed Potomac River bridge was joined by New York City radicals in town for another, more macro-political protest. There was no more ostentatiously radical tribe of activists than that nurtured on the polemics of New York City. They were, as Oscar Wilde once put it, more certain of everything than I was of anything. Even today, reading the *Village Voice* or the *Nation*, I occasionally sense someone staring disapprovingly at me from between the lines.

In this case, the New Yorkers' tactics included throwing rocks at the police. There had not been much of that sort of thing in Washington. As I wandered down Georgetown's M Street -- which had turned into a sort of free fire zone with the helmeted cops on one side and the protesters on the other -- the prop wash of a rock lapped my face and I decided it was time to leave the scene.

Others did likewise, propelled by the cops. The whole protest reformed on the campus of Georgetown University where I was soon accosted by several screaming, camera-grabbing, visiting radicals absolutely convinced that I was an undercover cop. This misapprehension annoyed me, since I was instead one of the few anti-freeway journalists in town. I was about to disregard my Quaker education when a local demonstration leader stepped in and vouched for my bona fides.

In truth, undercover agents were all around. Throughout America, police were spying on, infiltrating and disrupting movement groups. Even outside America, students took notes on other students for the CIA. You knew it was a problem, you saw it, it had names on it. I tried to be pragmatic. I had lived several summers in a house in Maine with a crank telephone and a party line. Anyone on the line could listen in on anyone else and the operators could listen in on everyone in town. I thus had never thought of the phone as a device for private conversation. Further, I figured that one of the best ways to handle the problem was not to overload one's life with secrets and conspiracies. I told friends that the worse thing that could happen if my phone were tapped was that the intruder might actually learn something. I considered myself something of a missionary and who better to convert than a member of the intelligence community?

I therefore found it interesting but not unduly alarming when a subscriber I thought affiliated with the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CIA bought two subscriptions year after year. I was somewhat flattered when this subscriber introduced himself and invited my wife and I to dinner and then was somewhat disappointed when nothing more was heard from him after the dinner except for his annual renewals. Apparently my policy of non-conspiratorial openness was too boring to pursue.

Similarly, I enjoyed my conversations with a 9th Precinct police officer who would drop by the *Gazette* office with his dour squad car partner. I may be the only underground newspaper editor in the country who was periodically visited by a non-undercover cop to discuss politics, both of us on company time.

To be sure, I had known the officer over the years, mainly as his sister's brother. He had first come around to my office shortly after graduating from Harvard to discuss what he was going to do with his life. One of the options had been to join the police department. I attempted to discourage him but to no avail. He took the job and ended up in my own precinct and with my own office on his beat. Officer Don Graham has continued to ignore my advice in his later employment as publisher of the *Washington Post.*

I assumed Graham was filing reports about me with someone, just as someone had filed a report on another alternative paper in town, *The Colonial Times,* when it ran a cover showing a fat lady protesting a local revenue proposal with a button reading, FUCK THE FOOD TAX! A postal inspector, apparently assuming that our papers were locked in mortal combat, came by my office one day to suggest I file an obscenity complaint against *The Colonial Times.* Instead, I gave the fellow a lecture on the First Amendment and called my friends at the *Times* to warn them of the danger afoot.

It was a time of hidden agendas and multiple agendas. The police found a few black militants willing to disrupt white peace groups and a few white radicals willing to do the same. On May Day in 1971 when the police arrested 12,000 people in DC -- including reporters and bystanders -- in what was probably the largest mass arrest in American history, I noticed a prominent black militant trapped in one of the corrals the cops had improvised. About a half hour later, he was out of the corral and talking to a top department official. Then, not long after, he was back inside the roped off area. You learned to look for things like that just as I had learned to keep looking behind me at demonstrations so I could see where the cops were moving. Which is how I didn't get arrested on May Day 1971.

Some of those trapped were detained in an old sports arena; others were herded onto the playing field of RFK Stadium. That night the temperature dropped to the thirties.

I went to the courthouse -- crowded as an airport at Thanksgiving -- sometime after midnight to bail out a friend on personal recognizance. I wore a coat and tie and when the judge asked if I were a DC resident, I stood at parade rest and replied, "A native, your honor." My friend was released.

Tony Auth appeared in underground papers like the Gazette before becoming a Pulitzer prize-winning cartoonist for the Philadelphia Inquirer. The Gazette also introduced Washingtonians to Dave Barry and Zippy the Pinhead

A while later, this same friend called from Baltimore to borrow my office "as place for the press to meet before an action." I asked what was up. "Don't ask," my friend instructed. "I don't want you to know. That way you won't be liable." I agreed to help. The reporters and the activists arrived at my office at the scheduled time and within minutes departed on their still-unidentified mission. Later that day I learned that nine protesters had broken into the offices of the Dow Chemical Company and spilled blood over the office files in an anti-war protest.

The next morning my wife Kathy woke me saying that I'd better look at what was in the *Post.* In the upper left corner of the front page was a story describing the attack. In the lead it said that reporters had been told to meet at the offices of *The DC Gazette* and gave the address, 109 8th Street NE.

I was upset and angry. The *Post,* it appeared, was setting me up for retaliation -- legal and otherwise. My only role in the affair had been to provide a gathering place of my news colleagues and now the Great Prude of 15th Street was out to punish me for having done their reporter a favor. I called a lawyer friend who came over and calmed me down. Nothing more came of it. Which, however, is how I came not to trust the *Post.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In my neighborhood, the Age of Aquarius often looked more like a war zone. Many of the people there were not part of a counter-culture but of an abandoned culture. Even the jukebox at the Stanton Grill -- purveyors of Greek and American food to white Appalachian boarding house residents -- played the Supremes, not Bob Dylan.

We lived in one of the toughest sections of town but experienced relatively few problems. Two cars of friends were stolen from our block. Our house was broken into several times. Once, a half gallon of vodka was returned to us by the police, complete with blood stains and evidence tag. I kept it like that in my bar. Some months later, the house was broken into and the bottle stolen again.

There were a few break-ins that were less than routine. One afternoon I came home and found my front door busted open. Through the void, two friends were pushing an ugly old mantle piece they thought would look nice around my fireplace.

I had bought the traditional Washington row house on 6th Street NE after becoming engaged but before getting married. I assured Kathy that the neighborhood was safe. It was, after all, only about four blocks away from where I was already living. The neighborhood kids who helped me move weren't so sure. Over lunch at my new abode, one observed that he "wouldn't come over here with the whole US Marines."

"But," replied another, "It's better than Death Alley."

"Death Alley?"

"You know, Sam, that alley behind your apartment." I had never thought about it from a kid's point of view, but he was right: the dead end of Death Alley would not be a pleasant place to be trapped.

When I returned the next morning, I quickly realized that one of my prized possessions was gone already, an eight-foot styrofoam sailing dinghy precisely named the *One Iota*. It was barely more than a beer cooler with canvas, rudder and a dagger board, but at forty pounds, it was easy to flip on top of Gloria and drive down to Roach's Run at the end of the National Airport runway for a late afternoon sail. Gloria was my ten year-old Chrysler New Yorker. It was also precisely named. I called it Gloria because it was sick transit.

Sailing on the Potomac was something of an exercise in maritime masochism. The down draft of a landing plane could easily flip a small sailboat that was using the end of the runway for home port. On one occasion I beached the boat to take refuge under a freeway overpass during a thunderstorm. There wasn't much wind in summer and it was said that if you fell overboard you should get a tetanus shot. I tried, however, to give the experience some elegance: I placed a jack staff on the transom from which I flew a tiny yacht ensign and there were two cocktail glass holders mounted on gimbal rings.

Now my beloved yacht had been stolen from the backyard. The window in the basement was also broken and mast, oars, rudder, daggerboard, lifejackets and sails were all gone. Nothing else in the house had been touched. Clearly a ruthless gang of cheap sailing dinghy thieves had been at work.

I walked down to the 9th Precinct -- then claiming the city's worst crime rate -- and reported a stolen boat. The desk officer kept calm, and even looked intently at the Polaroid I had brought along. "Would you like to keep it?" I asked. "No, I wouldn't know where to file it."

Later that same day, John Crumpwell Ogden[1], attorney at law, part Cherokee, all alcoholic, and about the foulest-mouthed, craziest paragon of decency I ever met, called to say that he had borrowed the *One Iota* and would soon be returning it. It seems he had been on the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay the previous evening and had decided at about two in the morning to go for a sail and thought I wouldn't mind.

Which is one of the reasons I was less than totally surprised by the subsequent forced entry by mantelpiece. One of the perps, after all, was John Crumpwell Ogden. John was beloved in the neighborhood until about the third drink after which almost anything was possible. He had, as chair of the local recreation council, once called a 6:30 am emergency meeting to deal with the just discovered misplacement of two pieces of play equipment in an

[1] A few names have been changed here.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

unprotected corner of a park only a few feet from a freeway entrance ramp. We quickly gathered in a nearby home as John awakened the recreation director with a torrent of obscenities. The equipment was moved later that day.

My circulation staff came from the neighborhood -- when they weren't in jail. At one point, about half of them were. I found needles behind stacks of papers in the office, had a few checks stolen and was even tipped to a kidnap threat credible enough that my wife and son left town while the police staked out my house for a day. But most of the time we got along pretty well.

With ten to fifteen thousand papers to distribute, I needed some help and there were plenty of youths in the neighborhood who wanted work. I could fit myself, ten thousand copies, and three kids into Kathy's roof-rack equipped red Volkswagen.

One day I came home to find several of the neighborhood youths watching another kid run out in front of cars, forcing them to swerve or brake suddenly. I asked what was going on. "Oh, Bo, he crazy," I was told. "He try kill hisself."

When Bo returned to the sidewalk I introduced myself and began to suggest alternative activities for the afternoon, none of which seemed to interest him much. Bo was 16, somewhat older than the others, and seemed considerably more sophisticated when he wasn't doing dumb things like trying to kill himself. Talking some more, I discovered that Bo actually knew how to type. Bo, in fact, was quite bright.

Which is how Bo became a part-time member of the *Gazette* staff. There were good days and bad ones, but I was an editor and not a therapist and so when Bo told me one day he was going to kill himself all I knew how to do was to sit with him and talk and talk and talk. Or when he called me up one night with the same intent, to talk and talk and talk again.

He didn't commit suicide but he didn't really get better. I tried to get him help but he had been raised on the idea that you were either crazy or you weren't and he, as he made sure I agreed, wasn't crazy. I finally persuaded him to go with me to the Area C Mental Health Clinic but that didn't take either.

Matters deteriorated and with the deterioration, Bo became more manipulative and less dependable and more frequently clearly on drugs. I finally reached the end of what I could do and told him so.

That didn't work, either. One night around eleven-thirty he showed up at our front door, very high and very scared, begging for sanctuary from his pusher who was after him. As I looked out the window, I saw a two-tone brown Cadillac drive slowly by several times.

I wasn't going to get into the middle of Bo's failed deals. I finally figured that the safest place for Bo that night might be jail. So I called the local precinct, explained the situation and suggested they just take him down to the station house until the problem subsided.

A white cop arrived and Bo left with him. As they walked down the street, something went wrong and the two started fighting, with Bo eventually losing and being forcibly taken off. A neighbor, a popular black singer at the nearby Mr. Henry's bar, looked out his window, saw a white cop assaulting a black man and went down to the precinct and bailed Bo out. One hour later, Bo was at my door again begging to be let in. This time I called the precinct and asked them to send a black cop and just take Bo home. They did and the evening ended.

But Bo continued his slide and was eventually arrested for robbery. While in prison, he wrote me a letter blaming me for his troubles. I wrote back in considerable heat telling him to stop blaming others and to get some help so he wouldn't be so screwed up when he got out.

When his time was over, he came to see me, rational and sell-possessed. He wanted a job but I told him that it was time for him to move on. I only saw him once again and he seemed all right.

There were several times I might have followed my own advice and gone straight. But I declined a job offer from a *Post* editor and when James Reston called and asked if I would like to be his assistant, I also turned him down. Reston asked me if I had any suggestions. I gave him the name of my friend and ex-roommate, Jim Sterba, then with the *Washington Star*. Sterba went on to cover Vietnam for the *New York Times* and became foreign editor at the *Wall Street Journal*. Neither fate would have pleased me much. Not long after, Reston called again and invited me to lunch at the Metropolitan Club. There, he proposed another job: editor of the *Vineyard Gazette*, a paper on Martha's Vineyard he had recently acquired.

I politely told him I felt I was too young to retire and I never heard from him again. The way I saw it was that I had enough money to risk doing something different and still had time to recover if I failed. Besides, I agreed with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Thoreau who said, "I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself than to be crowded on a velvet stool."

After that the establishment press pretty much left me alone, except that once Jack Limpert, editor of the *Washingtonian,* came up to me at a party and said, "Sam, if we were to name you a Washingtonian of the year, would you say anything outrageous?" I sort of smiled and he excused himself and I never heard from him again either.

To tell the truth, however, a year or two earlier I had seriously considered working for the *National Enquirer.* A friend at *Congressional Quarterly* called with news that a mutual acquaintance -- a deputy editor at the tabloid -- was looking for a Washington column. The *Enquirer* was willing to pay $800 a week -- an enormous sum at the time albeit some of it intended for loosening lips.

My friend's scheme was brilliant. Four of us would write under a single pseudonym. Thus we could all keep our day jobs while writing one quarter of a column for a fee greater than my salary as a Coast Guard lieutenant.

For five hours, we sat in the dark, dignified dining hall of the Mayflower Hotel discussing the project with the tabloid's chief editor, a small, dapper Englishman who moved from national politics to reflections on the importance of dog stories in perfect segué. We sold each other on ourselves and the three other conspirators -- all of whom worked for *CQ* -- returned to broach the subject with their publisher, Nelson Pointer. Pointer pointedly responded that they could either work for *Congressional Quarterly* or for the *Enquirer* but not for both. The scheme disintegrated. I did get paid $100 for a single paragraph item the *Enquirer* published, but afterwards I felt a little tawdry and never submitted anything else.

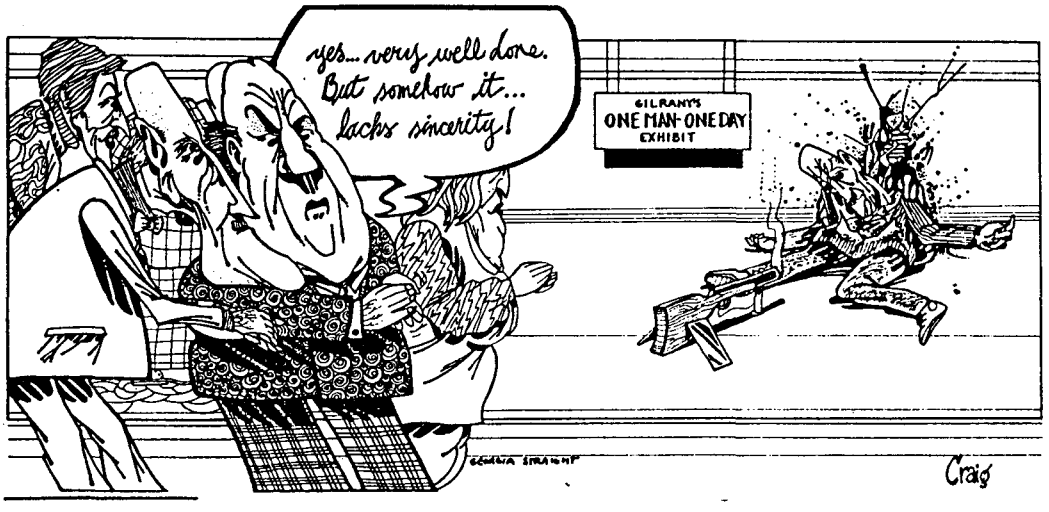
When I talked to James Reston, I was not actually sitting on a pumpkin. I was in the breakfast nook of our pullman kitchen on 6th Street NE, the first editorial office of the Gazette. A Yield House, pseudo-general store, cubby-holed, pine desk filled the opening between the kitchen and nook. An electric frying pan sat atop the desk, which is how some of the galleys went back to the printer with chicken grease all over them.

Paste-up and layout were done on the dining room table. I mostly knew radio journalism, but Kathy had been in charge of publications for the Wisconsin State Historical Society and taught me the intricacies of making words look good on a page.

At first we used a letterpress printer, then we went offset with rub-on letters for headlines, and later a complex, malodorous and malfunctioning headline machine that required each legend be typed on film and then routed on movie projector-type ratchets through three small containers to be developed, fixed and washed.

Our typesetter was an IBM Executive typewriter (later a pair of IBM Selectrics). Each mistake was retyped, the corrections excised from the paper with a razor blade and then affixed with rubber cement. At the end of an issue our dining room floor was covered with confetti.

Not long after Sally Crowell joined the *Gazette* as its first regular staff member, and her new son, Ted, became the first client of the paper's day care center (i.e. the living room floor), it became clear that the paper needed its own quarters and we moved into a storefront on 8th Street NE. I splurged on a big sign with *The Capitol East Gazette* in gold PT Barnum type on a black background. It made me feel that now I was running a real newspaper.



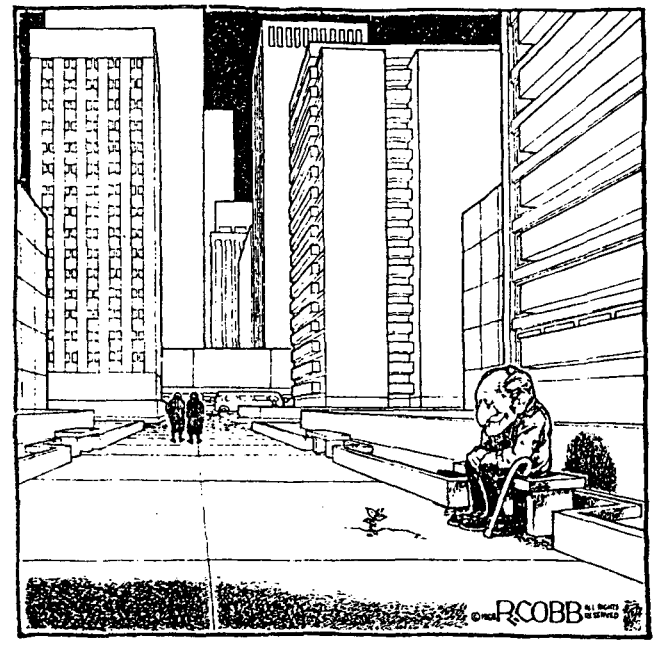
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The *Gazette* was part of a huge explosion of underground, alternative and community journals of the period. Only a few others of that era remain, such as the *Bay Guardian,* which started the same year as the *Gazette.*

The explosion had political roots, of course, but technological ones as well. The 1960s happened along just as conventional newspapers were switching from hot type to offset printing. The new machinery was expensive and, because of its efficiency, idle much of the time, especially at weekly publications. Printers were scrambling for any work they could get. The result was that a tabloid press run of 10,000 to 15,000 cost less than $500.

There were other economies as well. The Underground Press Syndicate eventually included several hundred papers willing to share stories and graphics without charge. The resulting journalistic synergy was remarkable. These were papers unhampered by the ambivalence that would come to afflict later independent media -- publications unable to decide whether they were an alternative to conventional journalism or merely its farm team. In the underground press, we knew which side we were on.

The Gazette was also blessed by a steady stream of talented folk who provided copy, let us use their columns or otherwise looked kindly upon us, among them Chuck Stone, Charlie McDowell, Erbin Crowell, Jim Ridgeway, Larry Cuban, Anton Wood, Anne Chase, Marcia Feldman, Jim Ramsey, Carl Bergman, and Mitch Ratner. Long before Tony Auth won a Pulitzer, the *Gazette* ran his cartoons. Zippy the Pinhead and Dave Barry were also introduced to Washington readers through the *Gazette.* And the paper featured the only urban planning comic strip in the country (by John Wiebenson) and the only regular column written by a jail inmate.



Ron Cobb, who was regularly published in the Gazette, was the most under-rated cartoonist of the era, perhaps because his notion of how the sixties might turn out was more Orwellian than Aquarian.

Then there were the critics. Kathy thought the *Gazette* ought to have an arts section. While I played jazz, I had flunked Fine Arts 13, seldom read cultural criticism and regarded myself pretty much a philistine. I finally told Kathy that if she really wanted an arts section she'd have to find someone to write for it. She shortly came back with Joel Siegel to cover movies and Tom Shales to write about drama. Siegel went on to be a local cinematic guru and Shales was hired by the *Washington Post*'s *Style* section, becoming its syndicated television critic. When *Style* began, Tom had written a *Gazette* column in which he quoted someone as saying, "What the *Post* needs now is a section called *Substance.*

After he went to work for the *Post*, Shales continued to write for the *Gazette* under the pseudonym of Egbert Sousé, a W.C. Fields character. A *Post* editor, however, discovered the disguise and the *Gazette* lost its drama critic.

Nonetheless there was soon no shortage of fine cultural criticism thanks to Andrea Dean, Cris Wittenberg, Jean Lewton, Val Lewton, Sally Crowell, Ed Merritt, Patti Griffith and Richard King.

Then there was Roland Freeman. Roland had introduced himself by screaming at me over the phone. We had run a striking front page shot of two karate students sent us by the Southeast Enrichment Center. When I answered Roland's call, I quickly learned that the photo had been his, that we should have given him credit, that he was a poor black drop-out who was working at a car wash trying to break into photography and how could we have been so cruel and so forth. Normally, I would have felt chastened, but Roland's aggressiveness sparked an uncharacteristic response: I started yelling back at him.

"Listen, you say you want to be a photographer?" I shouted.

"Yes."

"And you want full credit for your work?"

"That's right."

"Well, I'm gonna to tell you how to become a photographer and get full credit for your work."

"OK. I'm listening."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

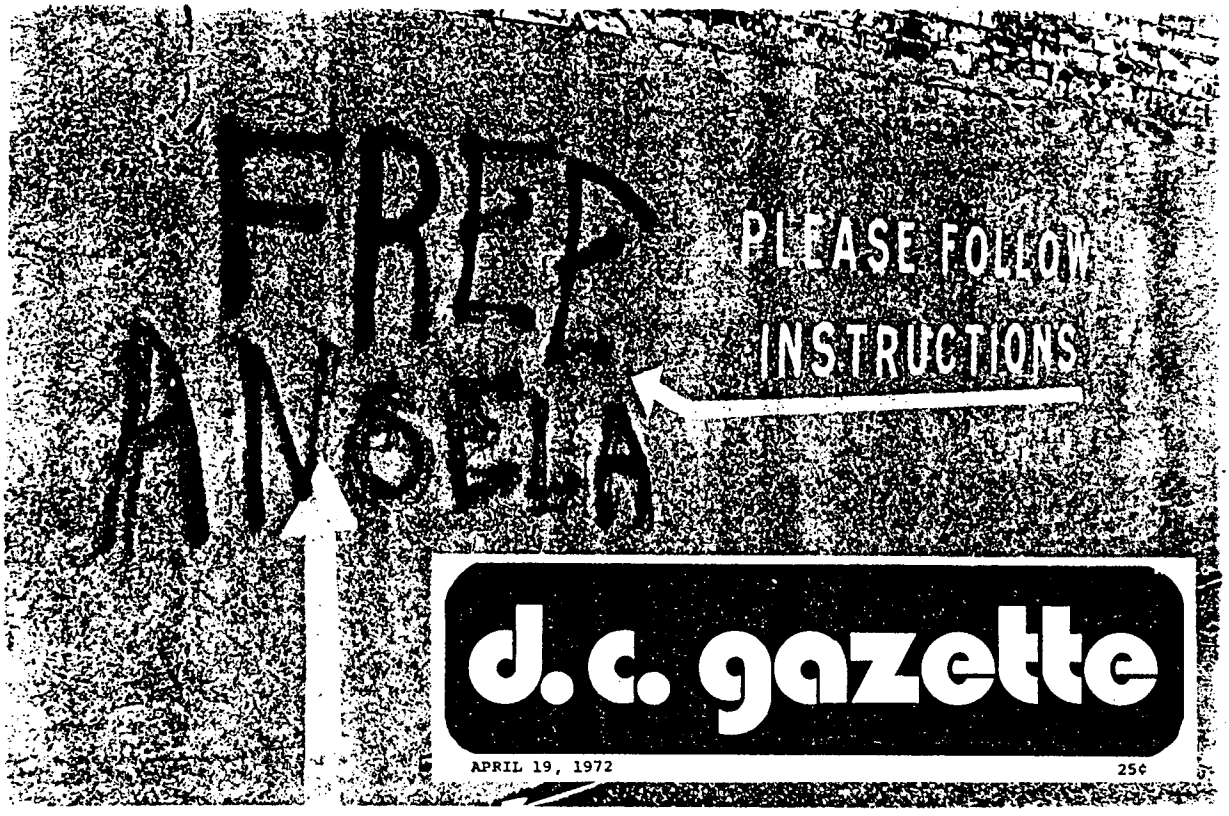


PHOTO BY DOUG FARQUHAR

"What you do is you go and get yourself a fucking rubber stamp made that reads CREDIT ROLAND FREEMAN, PHOTOGRAPHER, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED and you stamp every photo you take with that stamp and then you'll be a real photographer and I won't print anymore of your frigging photos without giving you credit."

We both quieted down and the next thing I knew Roland was photo editor. Later he would win the first photographic grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and become a nationally known photographer and, more recently, an expert on African-America quilting

Everything excited Roland. Once, as Kathy was driving him on a photo mission, he started barking orders, "Slow down! See that man on the park bench, I want to get him. . . Take a right . . . Okay, now grab a left. . ."

It was, however, a no left turn and a cop pulled Kathy over. As Kathy and the officer discussed her misfeasance, she could hear a repeated click and whir. Glancing to the right she saw that Roland had his camera resting on the seat and pointed at the cop as he wrote the ticket. The officer didn't notice and we ran the photos.

As an ex-publications director and, more recently, assistant press secretary to Senator Gaylord Nelson, Kathy had fallen comfortably into the notion that one should publish a neighborhood newspaper from one's house. Kathy was listed on the masthead as EDITOR'S WIFE and wrote a column of the same name. I thought it described her ubiquitous role pretty well while also providing a hint of Thurberesque menace. When the women's movement arrived, however, I was informed by several staff members that what I thought was wrong. By this time, Kathy and I had decided that putting out a publication together and staying married wasn't all that easy. We opted for the latter. Kathy became an historian and we thereafter followed the rule that I would take care of everything from the 1960s on and she would take care of everything before. It's worked pretty well, which is how we come to be celebrating the 30th anniversary of marrying as well as publishing.

As people who thought people over thirty shouldn't be trusted went to law and business school and became utterly trustworthy, the interest in alternative anythings began to wane. We didn't know it then, but Richard Nixon, for all his other faults, would be the last president to expand the social welfare state. America was slowly getting ready for Ronald Reagan.

It was becoming harder to publish an alternative paper. Meanwhile, however, the cultural critics on the masthead were multiplying and writing ever longer articles. I was used to normal journalism where no words were considered sacred; the *Gazette*'s critics, now happily

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ensconced in a separate section called the *Washington Review of the Arts* and taking up half the paper, were ready to argue effectively against the slightest abridgment of their efforts. And they had discovered my soft philistine underbelly.

I finally called the critics together and told them that we could either keep going the way we were and the whole paper would have to fold, or I would give them what it cost for three months of the arts section, which they could use as the basis for starting a non-profit publication. I would also throw in one IBM Selectric typewriter and Kathy would help design a layout for the new journal. It was, in effect, a sort of subsidized eviction. The critics bought the scheme and started *the Washington Review*, which is still going strong.

The meat and potatoes of our coverage were the endless meetings taking place in the community, not a few of them spurred by questions as to what to do and who should do it with money coming from the war on poverty. Everyone knew Robert's Rules of Order and its locally sanctioned addenda: "Mr. Chairman, I have an unreadiness." Sometimes the meetings broke up in pandemonium. One was literally turned around after the chair declared it illegal. The vice chair, a minister and cab driver who wore a clerical collar around his neck and a coin holder on his belt, stood up in the back of the room and announced that the meeting would go on and requested everyone to turn their chairs around. Most did, leaving the chair speechless in what was now the rear.

THE CAPITOL EAST GAZETTE

SERVING NEAR NORTHEAST AND NEAR SOUTHEAST WASHINGTON

MAY 1968

EDITORIAL OFFICE: 543-5450

News Notes

Local Candidates running

New pool design

Police reserve planned

'Black Dragon' coming

Ninth slows crime rate

Riot Losses Here Are Counted In Millions

Capitol East Picks Up the Pieces

The meetings may have seemed chaotic, but they were part of a community coming alive, of power being transferred to better places, and of the anarchistic results of discovering hope. And you met some wonderful people covering the story, people like public housing activist Lucille Goodwin who dragged her senile husband, rolling his plastic soldier in his hands, to every meeting and once explained to me how to handle the folks downtown: "You got to technique 'em," she said.

But what was happening hadn't happened soon enough. America's cities were starting to burn. In February 1968, I wrote:

> As contrary as the thought is to our national self-image, it is entirely possible that we are giving up the struggle to solve the deepest problems of our cities. ~ National Guard troops are undergoing special training. Hotlines are being established. Armored trucks are being purchased. Police riot equipment is being beefed up. ~ Ramsey Clark, the Attorney General, was probably correct when he told a group of police chiefs and city officials recently that the nation's power to deal with urban riots is increasing faster "than the underlying layers of frustration that cause them."

On the evening of April 4, 1968, I was up on T Street with a group of anti-freeway protesters picketing the mayor's house, when word came of Martin Luther King Jr.'s death. We went home as the police cars poured by filled with shotgun-armed and helmeted police.

The next morning things were quiet enough that we went about our business as usual. But I came home that afternoon from the office to find a slow stream of people walking down the street with liberated articles: hangers full of clothes, a naugahyde hassock, a television set. There were only a few whites living in the block; still I felt little tension or hostility. I mainly noted the black smoke drifting down from H Street, four blocks away.

Kathy was out back working in our foot-wide strip of garden, listening to reports of looting and arson on a portable radio as a black fog settled in. We decided to go up on the roof for a better look. H Street was burning. Others areas had gone first and the radio reported a lack of fire equipment to deal with the situation a few blocks to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to the north. I tried to count the fires but they congealed under the curtain of smoke.

We decided to pack just in case. For about ten minutes we gathered an instinctive selection of nostalgic items, favorite photos, the non-valuable but irreplaceable. Then we looked at what we had done and laughed. Like loyal children of our generation, we settled down in our smoky living room to watch on television what was happening to us.

For a year and a half of running a neighborhood newspaper, I had observed, and tried to report, a part of the community seething with emotions that much of the other part refused to recognize. Now it was worse than even I had thought and anger, frustration and helplessness washed up on my mind's shore.

The strange ambivalence of the riots -- the slashes of violence mixed indiscriminately with the sparkle of carnival, the sounds of racial war penetrating the tranquillity of a white couple's home four blocks from disaster, our strangely ordinary experiences in an extraordinary situation -- made the disorder a crazy amalgam that took weeks to sort out. For months after, when sporadic violence hit stores in our neighborhood, I expected to find our newspaper office smashed and looted. It wasn't, despite the inviting glass storefront. I was inclined, with normal self delusion, to attributed this to having paid my dues. It was more likely that our second hand electric typewriters weren't worth the candle when there was a whole Safeway up the street and a cleaners on the corner.

Some people seemed to think I had something to do with it all. One of my advertisers told me late one night that if anyone firebombed his store he was going to come and personally burn my house down.

Len Kirsten, an advertiser and owner of the Emporium, was more blasé. A lady walked into the store one day and, spotting the pile of *Gazettes* on the floor, said, "Isn't that a Communist paper?"

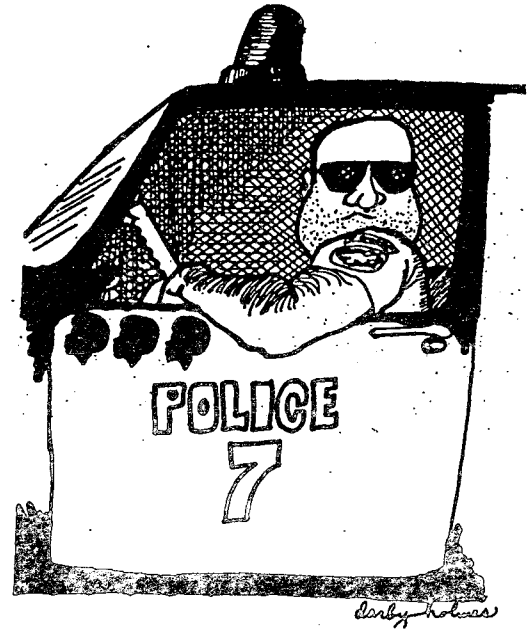
"Oh no," Len replied cheerfully. "The editor's communist but the paper isn't."

Lee, of Helen & Lee's Chinese carryout was totally indifferent to politics. Lee and his wife ran a regular ad bragging that the carryout had been recommended by their four doctor sons. One of the items on the menu was a pork chop sandwich -- the chop still on the bone slapped between two pieces of Wonder Bread. After Helen died, the sign over the door was changed to read: & LEE'S CARRYOUT.

The riots weren't the end of it. Even where there was a building to come back to, business on H Street wouldn't really return for decades. A real estate dealer's home was fire bombed as was a local settlement house. White and black friends no longer saw each other. And one day, in the dingy basement offices of SNCC, Stokely Carmichael said that whites were no longer welcome in the civil rights movement. Black nationalism had arrived and people like me were out.

The dream of a functioning bi-racial community was in pieces. H Street, with its jagged free standing walls and piles of rubble, looked like photos from a World War II retrospective. For me, hope had lost its virginity. There was no work for a white editor in a black neighborhood anymore. If I was to talk to anyone now, they would have look a lot more like me.

To be sure, a bi-racial slate of reform Democrats



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was elected in early May as convention delegates and central committee members. The slate included both Bobby Kennedy and Gene McCarthy supporters, united in a desire to defeat the locally popular Hubert Humphrey. I won one of McCarthy's slots on the party central committee.

One month later, Bobby Kennedy was assassinated. I wrote on June 7:

> The nation had watched John Kennedy die and had not changed. It had watched Martin Luther King die and had not change. And it had watched Robert Kennedy die. ~ The central point of these tragedies was not their proximate cause but rather that we, as a nation, had assigned so much of the burden of hope, progress, decency and faith to so few men.
>
> ~ Tomorrow I shall go down to see the funeral cortege arrive at Union Station. I shall go not just out of sorrow and respect, but also to try to find some small sign that we collectively -- without waiting for someone else to do it for us -- are willing and able to have a dream, or seek a newer world. Then, perhaps, we can become young again.

About six months later, I folded *The Capitol East Gazette* into *The DC Gazette,* a publication more like the many alternative papers sprouting throughout America. In the mid-eighties it became *The Progressive Review.*

So that's how the trouble began. I just followed Yogi Berra's advice: if you come to a fork in the road, take it. I did and, in the words of another poet, that has made all the difference.

There were plenty of days when it seemed like it might have made more sense to have played by the rules. I did know how. And it certainly would have been easier, more remunerative and more commonly praiseworthy.

George Orwell once observed that a circus dog will perform somersaults at the crack of whip, but that a really well trained dog doesn't need the whip. There are lots of really well trained people in Washington -- even more so in recent years.

Whatever the faults of the sixties, it was possible then to be an unregulated, unprogrammed human spirit trying to do something decent and not be considered dangerous, eccentric, foolish or irrelevant. Today this city -- so smug in its inertia, so arrogant in its enervated premises, so self-assured in its corruption -- hardly notices the voices of change any more, and if it does it is only to dismiss or scorn. The city's elite has become impervious to the clamor outside the gates.

Still, the choice remains the same. As E. F. Schumacher argued, you have to keep trying to do right or else you become part of the problem rather than of the solution -- even if in the end you often feel trapped, as Niebuhr suggested, between the futility of love without power and the tyranny of power without love.

On the other hand, thirty years have also passed for those who did their somersaults without the crack of a whip and I've got to say I've had a lot more fun. I have always believed the pursuit of happiness should be right up there with life and liberty and that Mencken was right when he said that a good horse laugh was worth a thousand syllogisms. One dirty trick the system is playing on us these days is that it makes change seem as dull and mechanistic and bureaucratic as doing nothing. Too often we now settle for talking heads on TV rather than clanging cymbals and dancing in the streets. Too often we become as boring as that to which we offer an alternative.

Subcommandante Marcos says we are not changing the world, we are building a new one. We said something similar in the sixties: we said that we were not out to overthrow the system but to make it irrelevant. We failed in many ways then and we may fail now, but there is no better choice. And so we just have to keep the faith, keep on truckin' and have some laughs and love along the way.

I'll keep trying if you will. After all, we're only getting started. --*Sam Smith*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SPECIAL ANNIVERSARY ISSUE: Thirty years behind the masthead

THE PROGRESSIVE REVIEW
1739 Connecticut Ave NW
Washington DC 20009-8922

Use this form to subscribe, renew or change your address

[ ] One year $18
[ ] Two years $32
[ ] Foreign one year $28
[ ] Contribution enclosed $_____
[ ] Please correct my address at right

Mail with check to address above

SUBSCRIBER NEWSLETTER

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED